

SCHOOL BOARD MEMBER
FOCUS GROUP STUDY

FINAL REPORT

May 16-25, 2011

New England Secondary School Consortium

Selected Focus Group Research Findings

Introduction

Between May 16 and May 25, 2011, the New England Secondary School Consortium conducted eight focus groups in Connecticut, Maine, New Hampshire, Rhode Island, and Vermont to collect perceptions about and opinions of school reform and the core messages and initiatives of the Consortium and its five participating state education agencies. The focus group research strategically targeted a stakeholder group that bridges the divide between educational policy and the general public: school board members from districts with public secondary schools. The results of this research, along with several considerations derived from the findings, are presented in this report.

The focus groups were facilitated by Rhoades Alderson of the New Harbor Group in Providence, Rhode Island, with technical assistance from the Great Schools Partnership in Portland, Maine. Rhoades Alderson distilled the research findings and authored the report in collaboration with Stephen Abbott of the Great Schools Partnership.

Methodology

An average of ten school board members from each of the five member states participated in the focus groups. An email invitation was sent to the Consortium's school board distribution list, and prospective participants were asked to complete an online registration form. Consortium staff worked to recruit a diverse, representative sample of participants, including no more than two school board members from the same district. To the extent possible, the Consortium sought to recruit focus group members that balanced gender, age, ethnicity, educational and professional backgrounds, years of experience as a board member, geographic distribution, and the size of the school represented. The research questions and moderator guide were developed by Rhoades Alderson of the New Harbor Group and Stephen Abbott of the Great Schools Partnership.

Research Objectives

The following objectives informed the moderator guide, the session facilitation, and the final report:

1. Collect perceptions of and opinions about Consortium messages, policies, and strategies to inform the development of guidance and recommendations intended to optimize Consortium messaging and communications products.
2. Collect perceptions of and opinions about critical department of education initiatives in each state to inform the development of guidance and recommendations aimed at optimizing state-level communications and messaging.
3. Achieve a stronger understanding of existing knowledge, attitudes, and preconceptions about secondary school reform among New England school board members, with an emphasis on strategies aligned with Consortium and state education agency priorities.
4. Achieve a stronger understanding of local interpretations and processes when secondary reforms and state initiatives are implemented in districts: What are the major concerns or perceived threats? What is required to facilitate the adoption of new strategies and policies? What messages foster greater understanding of and motivation to implement critical reforms?

Participant Overview

A total of forty-six school board members participated in the eight focus groups conducted by the Consortium: two each in Maine, New Hampshire, and Rhode Island, and one each in Connecticut and Vermont (insufficient registration numbers led to canceling and combining the focus-group sessions in these two states). Forty-two school districts and forty-seven secondary schools, including both high schools and regional technical and career education centers, were represented in the study. The following table provides an overview of participant characteristics:

SECONDARY SCHOOL SIZE

100–500 students: 16 participants

500–1,000 students: 15 participants

1,000+ students: 15 participants

SCHOOL BOARD EXPERIENCE

Less than 2 years: 5 participants

3–5 years: 19 participants

6–10 years: 11 participants

More than 10 years: 11 participants

AGE DISTRIBUTION

26–35: 1 participant

36–45: 5 participants

46–55: 20 participants

56–65: 13 participants

66+: 7 participants

RACE/ETHNICITY

Forty-two of the participants identified as White/Caucasian, two identified as Hispanic/Latino, one identified as Black/African American, and one identified as Native American/Pacific Islander. Two identified as first-generation immigrants and one identified as a non-native English speaker.

PARENTAL STATUS

Fifteen participants indicated that they were parents of students who are currently enrolled in their district's secondary school.

PROFESSIONAL BACKGROUND

Seven participants indicated that they were retired and two indicated that they were semi-retired. Twelve participants indicated that they work or had worked in education (or in a related field) or that they had an advanced degree in education. Three of these participants work or had worked in higher education, one was an attorney specializing in school law, and another was the current director of a school-reform organization. The majority of participants work or had worked in white-collar professions that generally demand specialized skills and a strong education background.

A General Note on Focus Group Research

Qualitative research can provide a rich source of information that can help confirm or disprove assumptions, clarify theories of action, and uncover existing emotions and motivations. Participants in this study were selected in accordance with the needs and goals of the project, but they were not chosen on statistical basis. Therefore no statistical inferences should be drawn from this research. While efforts were made to recruit a representatively cross-section of participants and voices, the final composition of the focus groups did not reflect the full-range of diversity found on district school boards in the five sample states—a factor that should be considered when drawing any conclusions from this research.

New England School Board Viewpoints

Major Themes + Findings

Executive Summary

The school board members who participated in this study are extremely passionate about their district high schools and about improving them. Their conception of high school improvement begins with the image of a student and a teacher in the classroom, and it rarely expands beyond the borders of their district. This narrow focus on local issues, however, does not appear to be a reflection of parochialism—in general, the participants were well versed in the discussion topics and the challenges of systemic school reform. Rather, their viewpoint displayed an appreciation for the complexity of high school education and their recognition of the need to take political or complicating factors into account when seeking to improve a school. As they considered the questions and statements about high school improvement posed by the moderator, they seemed to take a “mental walk” through the hallways and classrooms of their high school and consider how the proposed changes would affect what goes on in their particular school. In other words, they thought in very concrete terms and were mindful of the potential consequences that any reform might have on their students, families, educators, and communities. They did not readily consider the longer-term, systemic, or more abstract benefits of a proposed reform—in fact, the larger “education system” was rarely considered. Eight major themes and findings emerged during the focus-group sessions:

MAJOR FINDING # 1

Participants had strong personal and emotional investments in the welfare of the children in their district. As school board members, they saw themselves as educational leaders entrusted with overseeing the intellectual, social, and developmental growth of their students. They do not appear to have preformed or prescriptive ideas about what students should do after graduation (they are not invested in all students going to college, pursuing certain kinds of jobs, or staying in the community, for example). Instead, the participants want each student to leave high school better able to navigate whatever educational or career path they pursue. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** Focusing on strong educational, career, and life preparation for each student and unique learner may be more effective than promoting a specific educational outcome. Communicate how stronger education expands life opportunities and empowers students to make more informed educational and career decisions. Be strategic and thoughtful when discussing college, and avoid framing higher education in ways that may make it inadvertently appear as though its being promoted as a “forced” or exclusive option.

MAJOR FINDING #2

In general, participants embraced the “one student at a time” philosophy supported by many school-improvement advocates (i.e., they agree with the premise of student-centered learning, personalized support for different learning needs, multiple pathways, etc.), but they also extended that same logic to the school—a “one school at a time” philosophy, so to speak. Just as every student should be taught, evaluated, and supported differently, they believe every school should be taken individually when reforms are being considered. In other words, they believed that improvements need to be customized and responsive to local contexts and factors, and no single policy or reform strategy would work for all schools in all cases. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** Avoid inadvertently communicating that a reform strategy is a “one size fits all” approach. Instead, underscore how it can benefit, or has already benefited, specific schools, and emphasize local flexibility during implementation.

MAJOR FINDING #3

When thinking about high school improvement, participants focused on the relationship between students and teachers. In their view, everything else—the entire apparatus of the education system—is there to support the student-teacher relationship. A new policy or practice is worth considering if it enhances that relationship, but it is likely to be vehemently opposed or rejected if it is perceived to harm or get in the way of teachers instructing their students. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** Always consider this default perception—the primacy of the student-teacher relationship; the supporting status of the school and education system—when framing school-improvement messages, especially for school board audiences. When communicating ideas about high school improvement, policy makers and reform advocates might consider adopting this framework as a starting point for their messaging: the student-teacher relationship at the top of a pyramid of support.

MAJOR FINDING #4

Participants expressed deep frustration with federal and state mandates, particularly standardized testing and curriculum requirements (likely reasons: a history of local control and concerns about impacting the student-teacher relationship). The feelings expressed went beyond exasperation to vocal disgust. Participants appear to have adopted a “guilty until proven innocent” attitude about any reform being touted by the government at any level. They want state or federal support for what *they* believe can work in their school; they do not want reforms dictated to them and they are skeptical of government support aligned with an agenda that deviates from their beliefs. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** Government agencies are presented with a difficult communications task—overcoming negative emotional reactions to communicate important priorities in ways that will help them be heard. A strong, focused communications strategy and clear, compelling messages emphasizing the supporting aspects of the program, and deemphasizing enforcement, could help mitigate negative reactions and cultivate greater support for the reform. Avoid framing strategies as mandates or inadvertently delivering “do this or else” messages.

MAJOR FINDING #5

Participants unanimously agreed that today’s students, as children of the Information Age, enter the classroom with a fundamentally different relationship to knowledge. They all understood that schools and educators have to adapt their practices to this new reality, and they agreed that necessary changes are not happening fast enough. Participants also recognized that schools have to shift their pedagogical focus from knowledge acquisition to critical thinking and skill building. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** This universal recognition suggests that board members and the public may be receptive to the premise that the educational equation has fundamentally changed. When communicating the need for reform, this finding presents a potential avenue to productive discussions about changing schools to meet changing student and workforce needs.

MAJOR FINDING #6

Participants also unanimously accepted the idea that students learn better when they can acquire knowledge, solve problems, or apply skills in real-world situations. Yet this recognition, when considered in terms of the relative absence of real-world learning opportunities in schools, left participants wondering and looking for answers. In other words, the importance of this disconnection only became apparent when it was pointed out. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** The importance and advantages of more relevant, project-based, real-world learning appear to be readily embraced, but community members and the public may not have a concrete or fully fleshed-out understanding of what such learning actually looks like in practice (i.e., how it differs from traditional learning). This finding suggests that there may be a huge missed opportunity to engage stakeholders by emphasizing the need for more relevant learning and using it as an entry point for a larger discussion about change and improvement. However, audiences will need a vivid and detailed picture of real-world learning practices being conducted in a context they can understand and relate to.

MAJOR FINDING #7

High school improvement that requires structural changes—to the typical school schedule or traditional assessment strategies, for example—were harder for many participants to consider carefully and see as potentially viable or effective. One Connecticut participant put it this way when discussing a proficiency-based system, “We’re not going to put an arrow in our students’ backs by being a pioneer,” which suggests that such strategies could be interpreted as risky, experimental, or detrimental to students. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** Structural, systemic, or technical reforms are less tangible or readily understood, and therefore they present a potential barrier to understanding and acceptance that may need to be overcome. These practices should be framed carefully and strategically—for example, by connecting them directly to the student experience in the classroom or other familiar concepts. This stumbling block will have to be surmounted before an audience will be able to conceptualize and embrace the benefits of the practice itself.

MAJOR FINDING #8

A small but significant number of participants had strong negative reactions to the idea that high schools need to prepare students to compete with foreign workers in an increasingly competitive global economy. For this minority of participants, the reaction was exacerbated when specific mention was made of either China or India. **POTENTIAL IMPLICATIONS:** For some audiences, this common framing strategy may be overused or may appear to suggest that education is only valuable for its ability to produce better, more competitive workers. Framing the education-economy link in this way could be a hot-button issue that might alienate certain audiences—most likely educators and other audiences that have heard it before or disagree with its implications. Tying education to citizenship, personal fulfillment, and other benefits may resonate with these audiences.

Technical Summary: Perceptions of Reform Statements

The table below presents the results of a written exercise given to participants during each session. The activity asked participants to rate their level of agreement with a selection of statements about high school innovation, and each statement included common school-reform terms associated with strategies supported by the Consortium and its five member states and departments of education.

The purpose of the activity, which was administered during the beginning of the focus-group session, was to collect baseline reactions to the statements and associated terms before participants engaged in the more thoughtful group discussions that followed. An average score of “5” indicates strong agreement, a score of “3” indicates neutral or noncommittal feelings, and a score of “1” would indicate strong disagreement. The results for all eight focus groups were collected and averaged for each statement.

21 st century skills—like critical thinking, problem solving, teamwork, financial literacy, and technology—are essential for success in today’s world.	4.91
The goal of high school is to prepare every student for success in life.	4.83
High schools need to make sure that graduates leave with the skills they need to be competitive workers in the global knowledge economy.	4.6
It’s every high school’s responsibility to teach students the skills they need to succeed in college, work, and citizenship.	4.5
Today’s high schools need to teach relevant, real-world skills that students can apply in every area of adult life.	4.47
High schools should provide personalized learning opportunities and flexible pathways to graduation that allow students to manage and design their own education.	4.43
Our high schools need to be more student-centered and provide personalized learning opportunities that are based on each student’s interests and aspirations.	4.39
A high school diploma should be based on demonstrated proficiency—it should certify that all students have achieved high learning standards.	4.37
In the 21 st century, students need some form of higher education or postsecondary training to get a good job.	4.28
We need strong high schools to make sure our students can compete for jobs against workers from India and China.	4.11
Our high schools haven’t changed much for decades—they need to be more innovative when it comes to how they teach today’s students.	4.09
Improving equity and reducing achievement gaps between poor students and wealthy students, and between minorities and white students, should be a primary goal of our education system.	3.93
Every student should graduate from high school prepared for college.	3.2

Technical Summary: NESSC Regional Policy Agenda

This section summarizes the findings from discussions focused on gauging participant understanding of and support for the Consortium’s regional policy agenda. Three pillars of the policy agenda—flexible learning pathways, personalized learning, and proficiency-based education and graduation decisions—were individually addressed and discussed. The moderator’s questions are presented verbatim, along with a selection of representative participant statements. Several key observations and findings are also presented for consideration.

MODERATOR INTRODUCTION: *Some high schools across the country are trying to improve teaching and learning by changing how they teach students, and many of them are getting remarkable results. I want to share a few of these improvement strategies with you and then get your perceptions of them.*

Flexible Learning Pathways

MODERATOR: *Some high schools offer students more flexible ways to learn—for example, they give students the opportunity to take courses at a local community college, participate in an internship for which they can earn high school credit, or take “virtual” online courses that allow them to work at their own pace. Do you think these more flexible learning programs would work in your high school?*

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Participants were familiar and generally supportive of the flexible-pathways concept. It was not considered experimental, and the concept was largely accepted and supported—it was even celebrated by some. While nearly all the participants had high regard for the concept, however, most view it as an add-on or supplemental strategy, not the core foundation of a high-performing school—i.e., it is a strategy used mostly at the edges of high school education, usually for either highly motivated or struggling students. Even among its biggest supporters, flexible learning pathways are seen as a great alternative for certain types of learners, not something that could and should have much greater participation. Those who understand and favor the idea of “mainstreaming” flexible learning pathways expressed the belief that the education community still hasn’t figured out how to do it well and, consequently, implementing additional pathways in their district would be difficult. The major barriers cited were (1) resistance from some teachers who were attached to traditional methods and structures, (2) the difficulties it would pose for assessment and quality control, (3) deploying staff with the capacity and expertise needed to ensure quality and oversee the process, including increased demands on time and resources, and (4) persuading disengaged or less motivated students to try something different.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

“These are the things that are getting kids in our school more excited about what they’re learning, and it’s become infectious and others are taking advantage of it.”

—New Hampshire participant

“I have to say we haven’t arrived...we are not tapping [the university in our town] the way that we could...we want internships, the community has said in our strategic plan...but we have some things that are blocking that right now.”

—Rhode Island participant

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ Expect a positive reaction to the flexible-pathways concept, but recognize that people will have difficulty seeing this strategy as a core foundation of the high school experience for all students.
- ⇒ Consider framing flexible learning pathways in terms of “adding choices” or “creating new learning opportunities”—i.e., framing it in terms of “more” rather than “different” educational opportunities may have more traction. As a way to spark greater inspiration, engagement, and motivation, make the case that every student can and should have the opportunity to choose from a broader array of options—especially those that emphasize real-world relevance and learning by doing.

- ⇒ Be prepared to address the perceived barriers to implementation—anticipate these concerns and formulate strong, compelling answers. Find and profile examples of successful implementation, including examples from a variety of circumstances: urban and rural settings, small and large communities, grant funded and non-funded schools, etc. Articulate a roadmap to broader adoption that does not require turning the school upside down—i.e., incremental, practical change as opposed to rapid revolution.
- ⇒ Stories of students who found inspiration, or changed the course of their educational journey, through an internship, online course, or an experience at a career-and-technical center or community college will not only help to make a compelling case for multiple pathways, but it should also help to make these kinds of opportunities seem less risky or experimental and more practical and down-to-earth.

Personalized Learning

MODERATOR: *Many high-performing high schools make sure all students receive the personalized support they need to succeed. For example, these schools pair students with a teacher advisor who gets to know them well, and teachers continually measure student performance throughout the school year to identify learning weaknesses and provide the extra help students need to succeed. Would this personalized approach to learning work in your high school?*

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

When most participants heard, “Many high-performing high schools make sure all students receive the personalized support they need to succeed,” they instinctively saw dollar signs. The general perception appeared to be that personalization is a great idea—in theory—but that in practice it would be expensive, perhaps prohibitively so. There was also, as in other areas, concern about the additional burdens that personalized learning would place on time and human resources, and that teachers might not be enthusiastic about adopting more time-intensive strategies. Most participants had experience with advisories in their districts and they generally have positive feelings about them—but they also recognize their limitations. The concept of personalization also prompted many participants to bring up the subject of guidance counselors, and to express regret that counselors are less effective than they could be, in most cases because there are too few spread across too many students.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

“In a public school this is just not realistic.... It exists to such a sporadic degree that perhaps it’s not effective enough for students who are at risk. Would it work? Yes. But it needs to be funded at a certain level.”

—New Hampshire participant

“I so look forward to the day that it’s done effectively. The schedule’s not allowing for a real deep experience of [mentoring]. I think there needs to be time designated in the day for those kinds of activities to happen, and places to send those kids, and I think those teachers need to have access to the kids’ parents and their schedule and their teachers and a whole bunch of other things. It needs to be much more formal.... There needs to be more.”

—Rhode Island participant

“We have so many of our kids who are ghosts in our high school. Nobody really knows who they are.... You get paid attention to when you’re not doing something right...and it’s okay just to float through high school. If every single kid was paid attention to in some way on some level by an adult they can trust in high school it would make a huge difference.”

—Maine participant

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ In messages related to personalized learning, the cost issue may need to be addressed directly and concerns alleviated up front. Having a quick example at the ready—how a specific school was able to accommodate personalization without major investments or a radical change in the structure of the school day—would help to reinforce the message.
- ⇒ Advisories appear to be the default conception or association for this audience when the subject of personalization

arises. Offering a more expansive explanation of personalization strategies, particularly strategies that can be incorporated into any course or classroom, could be a strong jumping-off point and an important frame to consider.

- ⇒ When telling the story of successful incorporation of personalization by a school, be sure to mention that it was accepted by teachers and why, specifically, it was accepted and how it helped them teach more effectively. Fear of teacher resistance was the third most identified barrier to implementation after concerns about cost and the possible necessity of restructuring the school day.

Proficiency-Based Education and Graduation

MODERATOR: *Many of these successful high schools are changing their graduation requirements. Instead of awarding diplomas based on the number of credits students earn, they are requiring students to meet very specific learning expectations and to demonstrate that they have mastered subjects before they can move on to the next grade or graduate. Students in these schools create portfolios of their work and give public presentations that show what they have learned. Would this approach to learning be a positive addition to your high school?*

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

On the whole, participants were ambivalent about a proficiency-based education and basing the graduation decision on demonstrated proficiency. The use of portfolios was generally viewed positively, but only when the strategy is judiciously used in “appropriate” subjects or for certain kinds of students. Many participants raised the oft-heard concern that a proficiency-based system would place college-bound students at a disadvantage because colleges wouldn’t know how to evaluate their achievement. There were also concerns about the potential impact on students at the other end of the spectrum—the student who can’t achieve “mastery” of a certain subject and who will consequently, they believed, get left behind. Many expressed skepticism that a universal assessment system for proficiency could be effective and reliable in any given subject. Finally, some participants raised concerns about parental acceptance, saying that proficiency-based learning strategies would be perceived as too radical, and would therefore invite objections and resistance from parents.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

“I see the ‘instead of awarding diplomas based on a number of credits,’ I’m not sure...I don’t see why that means you have to do away with the number of credits you need in order to graduate.... I think we can change the system without necessarily...I think when you start changing fundamental things that you’re used to having, you affect things like colleges that are trying to figure out whether your students are any good or not.”

—New Hampshire participant

“I think the key word for me is ‘addition.’ It’s an addition not an ‘everything.’ Sometimes the pendulum starts to swing too far in each direction.... What we found is that there are certain subject areas where portfolios make more sense.”

—Vermont participant

“With regards to portfolios and why it works for us—and not all schools obviously—it is English, math, social studies—all the core subjects—so they have to show competency in those and they’re coming together and they’re showcasing to the parents what they’ve learned in these. And they’re presenting their work so they have a sense of pride and self-esteem.”

—Maine participant

KEY CONSIDERATIONS

- ⇒ The concerns expressed by participants reveal a great opportunity for higher education to play a leadership role in overturning the perception that proficiency-based reporting places college-bound students at a disadvantage—or, for that matter, an opportunity for the Consortium and the five SEAs to play a leadership role in convincing higher education to do so. If higher education came out and publicly expressed support for a proficiency-based system, it would remove one of the most significant barriers to more widespread acceptance.

- ⇒ When discussing or framing proficiency-based education, take into consideration that it might raise a thousand logistical questions for audiences within the education community—school board members, administrators, teachers, parents, and policy makers who understand the concept in general, but who may not be fully informed about its benefits or who may already have developed a judgment of it. Questions likely to arise: Who develops the standards and how do they develop them? How can a standard be rigorous enough for high achievers and forgiving enough for those who struggle in a subject? What do schools do with the students who fail to meet standards? These questions, especially when unaddressed, are more likely to inspire fear and exhaustion than inspiration and motivation.
- ⇒ A great student portfolio may offer a powerful argument in support of proficiency-based learning. The participants who were the biggest believers in proficiency-based learning nearly always referenced a stunning portfolio project they had seen. If such examples could be packaged and presented in a powerful way, such a strategy could greatly strengthen communications focused on this issue.

Technical Summary: Testing Assumptions About Innovation

This section summarizes the findings from discussions focused on gauging participant assumptions about a selection of high school improvement strategies. Participants were asked to respond to statements that expressed specific viewpoints about the state of public high schools and educational innovation. Each statement was read aloud and participants were asked for their reaction. After collecting initial reactions, the participants discussed the subject at greater length.

MODERATOR: *Now, I want to talk about how you personally think about high school and teaching high school students. There is a lot of public discussion about the need to improve schools, develop stronger teachers, and find better ways to fund public education, but there is less discussion about how, specifically, high schools can be improved. What are the steps that school leaders and teachers need to take? What are most effective programs and strategies? What does a high-performing high school look like? I want to read a few statements and then we'll briefly discuss each one.*

High School Innovation: Statement 1

MODERATOR: *Today's high school students learn differently than you or I did when we were in school. They grew up accessing information on their own and at their own speed, so they often get frustrated or bored when the teacher determines not only what they are going to learn but how they are going to learn it. High school education needs to evolve with the times—just like companies and industries do.*

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Participants unanimously agreed that student expectations about learning have fundamentally changed, and that different teaching strategies are now required to engage them. While many disputed the “learn differently” language, there was general agreement that modern technologies and on-demand access to information has made students more accustomed to following their own paths of educational inquiry. They agreed that effective instruction must accommodate these expectations and be responsive to changing learning needs, but that the current state of high school teaching often doesn't reflect this new reality. The idea that more emphasis should now be placed on using knowledge and information well, and less should be placed on content exclusively, was strongly embraced, as was the idea being able to think well is more important than knowing a lot. When discussing how this pedagogical transition could be supported and expedited, participants generally focused on teachers. For this audience, teachers are seen as the agents of change. Rather than thinking about systemic reforms or outside-of-the-classroom policies, the dominant, default mental image is teachers teaching students in the classroom or teachers adopting new instruction practices. The teacher as “coach” was a common positive metaphor. “Spoon-feeding students” was a common negative metaphor.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

“[Students] have access to all this information but they don't necessarily know what to do with it—how to use it to better themselves. And that's what the teachers need to be able to do—to guide them.”

—Maine participant

"I don't know if kids learn differently but I think—not only the information overload—society is of course completely different today.... There's just so much in society that's different. But, frankly, our education system has not evolved. It's the same as when we went to school."

—Maine participant

"The way the brain works has been the same, but they acquire information differently. 'Acquiring information' and 'learning' are not the same thing."

—Rhode Island participant

"I think high school students do learn differently because it's a different world. I agree that they want to be able to be more independent in how they learn. We have a whole knowledge of multiple intelligences and how people arrive at the same answer differently, and our technology allows people to do that...so I think we do need to change it.... We just don't have the flexibility built into the system to allow it."

—Connecticut participant

High School Innovation: Statement 2

MODERATOR: We know much more about how students learn today than we used to. For instance, we know students have different learning styles and that brain development plays a strong role in how students learn. We also know that all students learn better when they can apply what they learned to real-life situations and problems. That said, high schools are pretty much the same as they have always been.

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

Participants largely agreed with this critique. Notably, every participant group accepted the blanket statement that all students learn better when they can apply what they learned to real-life situations. Most agreed that schools and the school system are largely or completely deaf to new information about how students learn. Many participants displayed a secondary reaction—frustration—because they didn't have or know about readily available solutions to this fundamental problem. Several participants mentioned that the era's overemphasis on testing is the major impediment to the kinds of innovations that would be required to address this problem.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

"This statement says to me we know more about students, but we're not applying what we know. I think this is true. Look at our system.... We're still having our high school students get up at 6:00 in the morning to attend classes at 7:30 when they're not awake. We know their brain waves...[don't] fit that cycle and yet we're forcing them to do what they've always done.... We know that doesn't work but we've not changed it.... There's a lot of truth to this and shame on us."

—New Hampshire participant

"The past ten years we've been stuck looking at the same tests. Focusing on test scores where all kids are supposed to learn the same things at the same speed at the same time.... How can you apply the ideas from this statement and at the same time test everybody with the same test?"

—Vermont participant

"The first line—I'm not sure it's true. I think if you ask a teacher, they always knew that kids learned in different ways and they did the best they could in how to [teach them]. In the middle there, the statement makes us think we know the answer but I don't think we do. It is indeed true that there are different learning styles and brain development has an impact. But I still don't know that we know how that translates to a successful student."

—New Hampshire participant

High School Innovation: Statement 3

MODERATOR: *Today's educators have so many more tools at their disposal to help them improve student learning. Technology can make teaching more engaging and help make complex concepts come alive. And teachers can track, more precisely than ever before, exactly what students have learned and what they may need extra help with. High schools, however, don't seem to be taking advantage of these new tools and resources.*

SUMMARY OF PARTICIPANT RESPONSES

This statement elicited a wide variety of opinions and not many points of consensus. However, a majority of participants disputed the idea that high schools aren't taking advantage of technology. Many also expressed worry that technology is viewed as a panacea and big investments are made in new technologies without thinking through the relationship between a specific tool and how it will be used to improve instructional quality. Additionally, many believe that teachers need much more professional development to get up to speed on new learning technologies, while acknowledging there's little time for such intensive training in school schedules or in professional development budgets. While many said they have seen effective use of technology to track and monitor student performance at the middle and elementary levels, few had seen it used effectively, or at all, in high schools.

REPRESENTATIVE STATEMENTS

"What we're seeing is we have pockets of success but it's connected specifically to individual teachers.... The structure of a high school doesn't necessarily support creative, innovative technology because these kids are sent to a classroom with one teacher. It's all on the shoulders of that one teacher to come up with creative ways to integrate technology."

–Maine participant

"You see much more of those tools accessed in the elementary and middle schools in our district.... But I think a lot of that has not made its way into the high school. You don't see better evaluation methods in the high school."

–Maine participant

"I disagree strongly. I disagree that we're not taking advantage. But I think it depends probably on the budget situation in the town.... I think any school district today absolutely depends on technology."

–Connecticut participant

"I just feel like often technology is used for technology's sake. A teacher can be engaging with or without technology. A teacher can be boring with or without technology."

–Vermont participant

Technical Summary: State-Specific Policy Questions

Connecticut

Familiarity with the Connecticut Plan: All participants were very familiar with the Connecticut Plan and its specific proposals.

Opinion of the Connecticut Plan: Many participants expressed frustration. Some expressed the belief that the plan is hypocritical in that it claims to promote flexibility in learning while creating stricter prescriptions about what students and schools must do. Some said they felt the legislation was rushed through and that its authors did not adequately listen to stakeholders despite making gestures in that direction. One participant said his district had similar graduation requirements, but that local school leaders and stakeholders resented being told by the state that what they were already doing is required. Another participant said it had not caused debate in his district and the capstone was embraced.

Maine

Proficiency-Based Diplomas: Participants viewed the move to a proficiency-based diploma with great ambivalence. While positive sentiments slightly outweighed negative reactions, most were cautiously neutral about it. The idea of changing the existing structure seemed daunting to this audience.

Governor's Five-Year High School Plan: Ten of eleven participants had heard about the plan. The overall reaction from these participants was negative to mixed. Some participants were hostile to the idea, citing cost, structural implementation problems, and a belief that it simply reinforces the advancement based on "seat time" paradigm. A smaller number of proponents said that the plan might offer more flexibility to students and be a good opportunity for those who need more time to learn and meet standards.

Charter Schools: Participants were fairly evenly divided on this issue, and their arguments fell along familiar fault lines. The question of how they would be financed was seen as a critical concern, although many opponents believed resources would ultimately be bled from traditional public high schools no matter what financing system or formula was used. A few participants who were generally skeptical of charter schools were warmer to the concept of creating such schools within traditional public schools.

Department of Education Website: Nearly all of the participating school board members use the website and believe it has a lot of good information—that was the positive. The negative was that most participants felt like it was disorganized and hard to access what they needed. Two recommendations stood out: (1) providing more information on how schools can reduce costs while maintaining quality, and (2) greater access to and more profiles of best practices.

New Hampshire

Familiarity with Extended Learning Opportunities (ELOs): Nine of the ten participants were familiar with the concept and the department of education's ELO program.

Opinion of ELOs: Participants generally had positive opinions about ELOs, but their perceptions also appeared to vary based on the extent of ELO implementation in their district. Participants from districts in which ELOs have been implemented more thoroughly tended to have very positive opinions; for those in districts that haven't implemented ELO extensively, they were generally interested in pursuing the strategy or pursuing it to a greater extent.

Compulsory Education Law: All participants were familiar with the law and the current political situation. They were also aware that the ultimate objective of the law was to mitigate dropouts and keep students in school. Eight participants said they wanted the current policy to stay in place. Two said they were for the proposed change.

New Hampshire Advantage: Participants generally agreed that the quality of New Hampshire's schools enhances the state's ability to attract businesses, families, and opportunities, and that it helps the state be viewed as an attractive place to live and work.

What Will High Schools Look Like in 2021? Among the responses were: no more books of any kind; a longer school day and extended learning time; a format more like higher education with larger lectures and smaller breakout groups that free up teachers to work more closely with students.

Rhode Island

Familiarity with Rhode Island's New Diploma/Graduation Requirement: Eight of nine participants were very familiar with the requirement and one was somewhat familiar.

Is the New Requirement Sufficient? Participants used this question to air concerns about the use of a standardized test as part of the new requirement. Some were opposed to the use of a standardized test on the grounds that it's an ineffective measurement for a graduation decision. Others were opposed to the schedule and timing of how this new system will use testing.

Would Your District Consider Increasing Local Graduation Requirements? All the participants who answered this question said "no," and the subject elicited emphatic responses. The general opinion among the participants was that they didn't want to place additional "burdens" on students. Additionally, there were concerns about how districts could handle the increased student populations that would result from fifth-year seniors.

Are Students in Your District Being Offered Multiple Pathways? All participants were able to offer examples of students who had taken advantage of learning opportunities offered by the addition of multiple pathways. Generally, the participants identified a lot of growing pains that accompanied the implementation of multiple pathways, but they would like to see these opportunities grow.

Vermont

Does Your Regional Technical Center Serve Your Students Effectively? Two major points arose during this conversation. First, there was agreement that physical proximity plays a huge role in student participation. For students who have a technical center on campus or close by, it is well used, well regarded, and well integrated into the high school program; for those who have to travel, it is rarely used and rarely integrated in meaningful ways. Second, participants were frustrated that the technical system was effectively siphoning off money from their districts when students take advantage of technical center programming.

Does Technical Center Programming Meet the Needs of Today's Students? Most participants believed that the technical centers did meet the needs of today's students, although some felt still more should be done to make programming more compelling or relevant to the nontraditional technical student. Some said there is still a stigma associated with technical courses that might dissuade some students.

What Programs Would Draw Nontraditional Technical Students? When this question was asked, participants reverted to re-explaining the same two core issues that the first question elicited, especially concerns about funding mechanisms.

NEW ENGLAND SECONDARY SCHOOL CONSORTIUM

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